

# James Brooks

by Sam Hunter



**James Brooks**

Whitney Museum of American Art

*February 12 through March 17, 1963*

Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham

*April 1 through April 28, 1963*

The Baltimore Museum of Art

*May 26 through June 16, 1963*

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

*September 1 through October 13, 1963*

Washington Gallery of Modern Art

*November 1 through December 8, 1963*

Art Galleries of the University of California, Los Angeles

*January 5 through February 9, 1964*

AN EXHIBITION BY THE POSES INSTITUTE OF FINE ARTS OF



# James Brooks

**BY SAM HUNTER**

Director, The Poses Institute of Fine Arts and Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University.

FOREWORD BY

**John I. H. Baur**

Associate Director, Whitney Museum of American Art.

BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY AND THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Photograph of James Brooks by Hans Namuth.

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At fifty-six James Brooks is still in mid-career, so this can be only an interim report. But Brooks has lived long enough to establish himself as an important figure in the non-objective art of our day. Once a figurative painter—and an exceptionally fine muralist—he has worked for the last fifteen years or so in that idiom generally known as abstract expressionism. Yet the term has little value as a definition of either the character or method of Brooks' art. His paintings have a sensuous beauty, a formal control and an orchestrated color which are not the common products of pure spontaneity or introspection. If he is indeed an abstract expressionist, he is probably our most ingratiating one, and an artist who places the emphasis on the first word rather than the second. In his innate gravity and reserve, and his preoccupation with esthetic matters, he stands apart from much New York school painting of the last decade.

This monograph is published on the occasion of the first large retrospective exhibition of James Brooks' work, held at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University in the spring of 1963, and traveling thereafter to several institutions in other parts of the country. The exhibition was selected jointly by the two museums above, in close collaboration with the artist and his dealer, the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery, both of whom gave invaluable assistance. A catalogue of the works shown will be found in the back pages. The Chronology and Bibliography were compiled by Miss Dorothy Dean, Curator of the Collections, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University.

On behalf of both Brandeis University and the Whitney Museum, I would like to thank the several museums and private collectors who so generously lent works to the exhibition and permitted them to be reproduced in these pages. They are: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass.; Dr. and Mrs. Bernard Brodsky, New York; Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh; The Chase Manhattan Bank, New York; Gardner Cowles, New York; Mrs. Harry Doniger, Rye, N.Y.; W. Hawkins Ferry, Grosse Point Shores, Mich.; Mrs. Frederick W. Hilles, New Haven; Mr. and Mrs. Samuel M. Kootz, New York; Samuel M. Kootz Gallery, New York; Dr. and Mrs. Joseph M. Krimsley, New York; The Lannan Foundation, Chicago; Mr. and Mrs. Edward J. Mathews, New York; Mr. and Mrs. Patrick B. McGinnis, Boston; Michener Foundation, Allentown Art Museum, Allentown, Pa.; The Museum of Modern Art; Nebraska Art Association, Lincoln; Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger, New York; Mr. and Mrs. James M. Perkins, Amagansett, N.Y.; Jeffrey Potter, New York; Mr. and Mrs. Berton Roueché, Amagansett, N.Y.; Mrs. Maurice L. Stone, New York; Mr. and Mrs. Joel M. Turner, New York; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

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## Foreword and Acknowledgments

JOHN I. H. BAUR

Oklahoma Barbershop. 1931. Oil. 20 x 32.

Collection of the artist.



**James Brooks** came to New York from Dallas in 1926, at the age of twenty, impatient to free himself of provincial attitudes and seeking an identification with the most vital currents in modern American art. Like so many of the fine abstract painters of his generation now active in New York, he found no immediately satisfying pictorial formula or coherent, native body of work of an advanced tendency during the twenties and thirties to which he could apprentice himself. His crisis of creative fulfilment came only two decades later with the emergence of the radical new styles of the abstract expressionists, whose communal struggles for recognition and historical adventure he shared and helped shape. Unlike many of the outstanding abstract expressionists of today, whose reputation in the late thirties and early war years was largely a clandestine studio affair, Brooks achieved wide recognition and acclaim during this period as a social realist painter and WPA muralist. Although his art has, then, two distinct phases of naturalism and lyrical abstraction, separated by the war years, these apparently antagonistic manners reinforce and illuminate each other, and the transition between them was far less abrupt than might be imagined.

Brooks' easy mastery of large spaces, his ability to compose flat color shapes in monumental scale, and a complex balance of poetic evocation

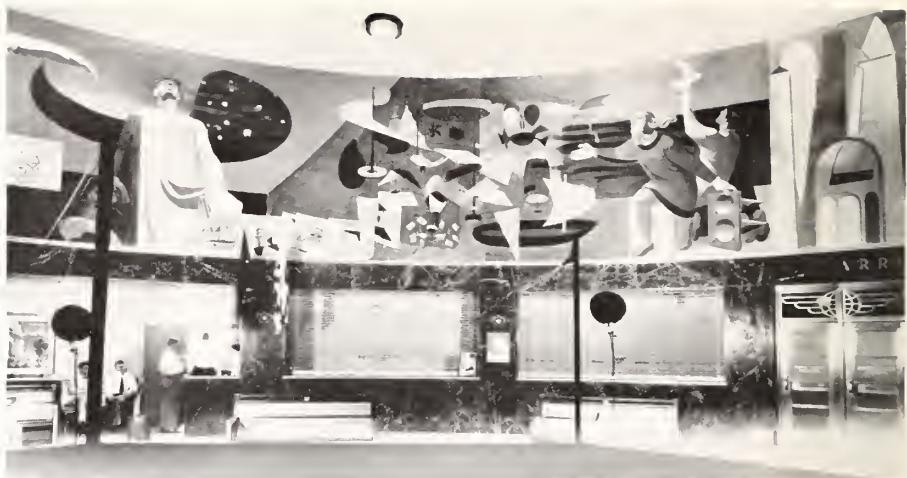
and intellectual control characterize his murals of the early forties as they do his abstractions of the past decade and a half. Throughout his career, he reveals a classical bias in his need to control and contain emotion not by suppressing it but by subordinating its poignancy to an art of serene breadth, sobriety and refinement. To describe as classical an artist who has worked principally in an expansive style of lyrical abstract expression, where so much emphasis is given to painterly touch, intimacy and romantic spontaneity, may seem a contradiction in terms. There has, in fact, been a duel in Brooks' painting between his own instinctive reticences and the dynamism of the post-war period in art with its sanction of large, expressionist liberties and emotional release.

A child of the age despite himself, Brooks mistrusts his more calculating and cautionary instincts. He has mercilessly, and increasingly in recent years, challenged them by stepping up the quirky, aggressive and disruptive elements in his work, or its potential of romantic mystery. Unbiased by his past achievement, he has again and again put his whole art in question under pressure of the crisis mood of some of his admired colleagues in painting, or, as he has stated, simply from "nausea with one's own pictorial clichés." It is a measure of his artistic resourcefulness and firmly rooted individuality that he can remain unmistakably himself when he is, apparently, most vulnerable and responsive to the tremors of shock and change in his surrounding painting ambience.

Brooks' serious artistic education began in Dallas shortly before coming to New York, first at Southern Methodist University and then in private classes with Martha Simkins, a former William Merritt Chase student and follower. Although no paintings of the student period survive, there soon appeared in his representational painting somber grounds and exquisite, bright color touches which may allude to Chase's typical color schemes, or to the "dark impressionism" of Edouard Manet from which Chase's palette derived. A distinction in nuanced color structure, keyed to warm, dark tonalities, was apparent in Brooks' painting from its beginnings, and continued in his later abstraction.

In New York, Brooks found immediate employment in commercial art as a letterer and display artist. This technical skill supported his serious studies for many years, first in night classes at the Art Students League with Boardman Robinson and Kimon Nicolaides, and then as he worked independently in his studio. Only in recent years has he been able to live exclusively from the sale of his painting, and as late as 1959 he still taught lettering at the Pratt Institute. He has also taught drawing at Columbia University and was three times visiting critic of advanced painting at

Flight. 1942. Mural for International Marine Terminal Building, La Guardia Airport, New York.  
12 feet 3 inches high, 235 feet long.  
Casein-glyptol resin emulsion.



Yale. During the early thirties, after completing three years of study at the League, he worked half the year as a letterer in New York, and painted and travelled in the west and southwest on sketching trips the remaining six months.

Brooks was then painting in the current social realist style; one of his first paintings, *Oklahoma Barbershop* of 1931, shows the ritualistic pre-occupation of the thirties with a theme of architectural decay and desolation in the American scene. The starkness and formal severity of this motif, repeated in the lithographs which brought him immediate recognition, *Early Morning* and *Copper Mine, Butte*, place him closer to the work of Sheeler and the precisionists than to the expressionist exuberance of popular regionalist painters of the day like Thomas Benton. Not only are there strong, prophetic allusions to cubist design in this earliest work, but the palette of *Oklahoma Barbershop* and related paintings is built around the typical triad of midnight blues, electric greens and incandescent oranges which remained a recurrent color scheme both in the mural and abstract phases of his later painting. Applied thinly and dryly, without much sensual body, and inflected towards an artificial and chemical brilliance, these colors have a disturbing romantic vividness, rather like some of Edward Hopper's garishly illuminated night scenes which Brooks admired at the time.

Brooks' impressive early reputation was based principally on six productive years as a muralist on the WPA's Federal Art Project. During the period between 1936 and 1942 he virtually gave up easel painting to complete two large murals for a post office in Little Falls, New Jersey, and

a library in Woodside, Long Island; and, in a herculean effort that occupied him exclusively over two and one-half years, he carried out the mural *Flight* for the rotunda of the International Marine Terminal Building at La Guardia Airport. The wall bearing the Woodside mural was destroyed last year to make way for new construction. Even more inexplicably, and tragically, the La Guardia mural was painted out as recently as 1954 or 1955 by executive order of the New York Port Authority, and it is impossible to discover the circumstances which led to this totally unnecessary and high-handed action. In a full-page article in *The New York Sunday Times*, the art critic Edward Alden Jewell described the 235-foot La Guardia mural as "a sound and well-sustained and sincere performance. . . . One of the most satisfactory murals, on so vast a scale, thus far produced by an American artist."

From existing photographs and color slides one can surmise the commanding architectonic power and lyrical grace of the original wall painting, which symbolizes episodically, in a mixed narrative style, the history of flight. Most striking is the rhythmic alternation between a stiff Giottesque figuration and delicate passages of free-form abstraction. A fantasy on Leonardo's aerodynamic experiments, painted in bright, flat lozenges of green and vivid red-orange refers to the expressive color scheme of Brooks' preceding realistic painting and looks forward to a typical chromatic invention of his abstract painting: the use of sub-dominant color chords of brilliant half-tones for evocative poetic effect. The rhythmi-



Early flight models and Leonardo da Vinci.  
Detail of La Guardia mural.

cally interwoven color-spotting throughout, and the flat decorative stylization of his heroic figures unified Brooks' figurative and abstract styles in the mural. For a moment, however, these separate though related manners disclosed with sharp clarity two deeply interlocked and interdependent facets of his temperament: the opposition of blunt expressive power and delicate grace. In his art clumsiness and bluntness have always been made welcome, both out of a profound expressive need, and as a relief from the civilized restraint and sensuous refinement that the artist recognizes as among his indisputable gifts, but against which he continually chafes.

Brooks left the WPA project in 1942 to join the army, and was assigned to the historical section as a combat artist in the Middle East. The new formality of his La Guardia mural showed itself in a series of semi-abstract water colors and gouaches which recorded scenes of daily army life, and the torn and twisted machinery left in the violent wake of the war. He spent the last five months of the war in Washington, D.C., in the O.S.S., and then returned to live in New York.

There he renewed contact with many of the painters he had first met on the WPA, who were now either leading members of the avant-garde, or about to join its ranks—among them Jackson Pollock, Philip Guston, and Bradley Walker Tomlin. He had known Tomlin intimately since 1931 when the two artists shared a summer studio in Woodstock, New York, and he saw him frequently once again. At the same time, he began to submit his work for criticism to the well-known teacher Wallace Harrison, whose “penetration into cubism” Brooks had come to admire. Working under the influence of Picasso’s and Braque’s synthetic cubism, he set himself to “learning how to paint again,” giving the surface plane more emphasis, and trying, as he has stated, to make “negative intervals just as real as the things that could be thought of as a bottle or a figure.”

Perhaps his first distinctively individual post-war painting was *Dialogue*, shown in 1947 at an exhibition where he appeared under Tomlin’s sponsorship. Superficially it can be related to Tomlin’s gentle atmospheric cubism of the immediately preceding years, and to the cool reticences of his palette organized around blues and greens. It also shows a preoccupation with masked figures which Brooks may very well have seen in Guston’s paintings of the period, but which were also common currency in a period of transition and refer back to the dramatic ambiguities of Picasso’s *Three Musicians*. For many American abstract artists Picasso’s painting came to symbolize their metamorphosis from a style of allegorical realism, and their rebirth in abstraction. Picasso’s protean,

shuffled identities, which functioned both spatially and theatrically, provided a ready metaphor for their own rite of passage. One should note, too, that *Dialogue* restates with surprising exactitude Brooks' vivid color schemes of *Oklahoma Barbershop* and the Leonardo section of the La Guardia mural. The interplay of flat, positioned masses and their flowing connectives, descending to a tapered elegance at their points of contact, are also immediately identifiable as typical and personal, expressive devices.

In 1946 Brooks started to see a great deal of Lee and Jackson Pollock, and went to live in their old studio on Eighth Street after they moved permanently to Springs, Long Island. Pollock frequently stayed with him on trips to New York, and the relationship grew closer when Brooks began to spend his summers regularly at the eastern tip of Long Island, from 1949 onward. He was aware of the drastic change from a modified cubism to a fluent and more spontaneous manner in Tomlin's work at that time, and his own art was entering a phase of radical transition. During the summer of 1948 he worked in Maine, loosening his impacted surfaces and translating the systematic design of cubist spatial order into a rhythmically accented brushwork, and an open, more complex spatial illusion. The changeover to a fluid and swift system of spatial notation, and the reliance on automatism and chance in the use of a free brush, owe a great deal to Pollock, and Brooks, with customary modesty and generosity, has been quick to acknowledge his influence.

Actually, it was an extremely personal discovery that decisively freed Brooks from the rigors of cubist composition. His Maine paintings had been made on paper and then glued to canvas for stability with a black paste which showed through as fragmentary shapes on the reverse side. Fascinated by the vitality of these ephemeral blotting and wraiths of form, Brooks began in 1948 the painting *Number 5*, and completed it in a far freer manner on its verso. Using an absorbent Bemis' Osnaburg cloth which allowed the reverse image to appear more distinctly, he worked repeatedly in this manner during the next two years. By thus exploiting automatism and chance, he dismantled at one stroke the imprisoning structural armature of cubism, and, as a mysterious bonus, found in his reverse image the ghostly schema of a new pictorial order that seemed to exist apart from his conscious volition, and yet was recognizably its product: immaterial and dispersed, set spinning in an unfamiliar spatial orbit.

Brooks' respect for the esthetic autonomy of the painting—so much at variance with popular cant which wrongly describes abstract expression-



Oops. 1947. Pencil over newspaper.  
12½ x 5. Lent by the artist.

ismi as confessional autobiography—dates from this period. Later he was to write in lucid explanation of his methods: "My painting starts with a complication on the canvas surface, done with as much spontaneity and as little memory as possible. This then exists as the subject. It is as strange as a new still life arrangement and as confusing as any unfamiliar situation. It demands a long period of acquaintance during which it is observed both innocently and shrewdly. Then it speaks, quietly, with its own peculiar logic. Between painting and painter a dialogue develops which leads rapidly to the bare confrontation of two personalities. . . . At some undetermined point the subject becomes the object, existing independently as a painting."<sup>\*</sup> The larger meaning of his painting, beginning in 1949 and supported and confirmed by the work of his fellow abstract expressionists, was the replacement of old dualistic conceptions of subject and object with the sense of the world—for which the painting supplied a model rather than a representation—as an uncertain act of continual human creation.

Brooks' first one-man show in 1949 at the Peridot Gallery included a number of paintings such as *Number 41—1949* which were thinly painted on unsized canvas and closely related in style to Pollock's open, drip paintings, but more measured and controlled in rhythmic phrase. The tactile surface and impacted forms of *Number 3* in the same show made continuing reference to cubism's horizontal-vertical grid. His art had evolved conservatively and with a remarkable inner consistency, and he felt free to ignore the lesson of cubist construction only when he had thoroughly mastered a coherent new system of form that would transpose its internal structural logic into a more personalized and spontaneous contemporary idiom. The transition between these two modes of composing is graphically shown in two *tondos* of 1949 and 1951. *Number 18* has stabilizing vertical and horizontal linear accents, and they explicitly diagram space, somewhat sketchily, to be sure, but with sufficient emphasis to curtail the activity of the flowing, aberrant circular shapes which do not yet seem to command the artist's full confidence. In the later *Tondo—1951*, suspended shape and connecting spatial interval, mobility of surface and full-bodied forms are unified and interdependent; they create a complex, open space cursive in its rhythms and powered by its own internal dynamism. The large scale of this and other paintings of the period invites multiple interpretations: they can be read as anonymous, enveloping pictorial environment, which dissolves personal touch in

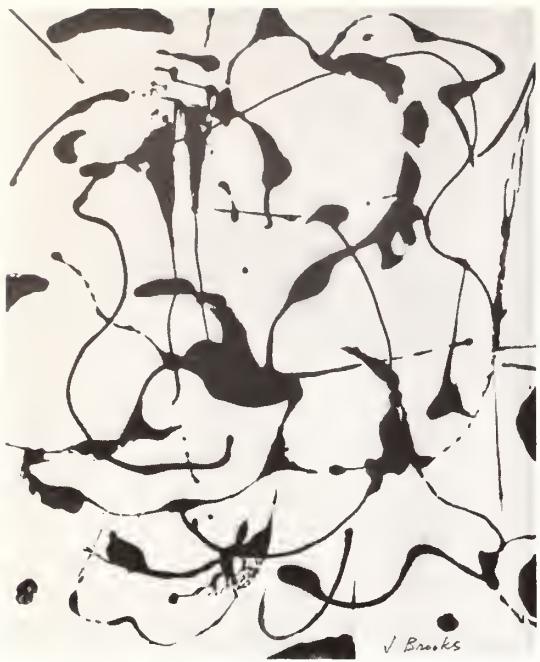
<sup>\*</sup> *Contemporary American Painting*, ed. Allen Weller, University of Illinois Press exhibition catalogue, 1952, p. 174.

monumental scale. Since the canvas rectangle is actually man-size, about six feet in height, the brush stroke is scaled to human reach and gesture, and the drama of immediate decision registers with a more vehement directness. This in turn creates a radical, new kind of intimacy.

Brooks' mastery of the rich ambiguities of abstract expressionism reached a high moment of poetic eloquence in the large *Triptych* of 1952. Suggesting oriental art in its color refinement and understated masses, the painting at first glance seems somewhat thin and bodiless, lost in the canvas weave and among its own indistinct echoes. In this diaphanous and fragile world, the pulse and flow of transient form, supported by vibrant color contrast of orange, yellow and blue, beat with powerful insistence and restore a more positive mood. Broken, merging color shapes take on fantastic creatureal form in their aggregate, and flutter in wild agitation. Violence momentarily subverts reticence, and fantasy breaks through customary constraint, but these outbreaks are self-limiting. The artist seems tactfully to draw the line at the point where his own feelings might be too deeply implicated or reflected in such dramatic encounters. The crises in Brooks' art are pictorial and esthetic rather than ego-centered.

At the end of 1952, the complex emotional atmosphere of *Triptych* was replaced by an interest in more direct expression and dramatic formal opposition. In *J* Brooks reduced his palette to monochromes, and gave his shapes a more assertive physical existence and bulk. The gouache, *Number 3*, of the same year, similarly emphasized more full-bodied forms, an opulent, fleshy brush, and assertive primary colors, perhaps in response to the art of Willem de Kooning which had become the most powerful single influence in advanced American art. It is interesting to note that ever since then Brooks has composed in two alternating color systems, which can be compared to major and minor musical modes. The minor mode moves towards a unified pictorial image by merging closely keyed half-tones, but never quite closes the dissonant gap of its narrow color intervals. The hypnotic power of this mode to evoke a submerged, affective life has led to frequent characterizations of Brooks as a poet of the subconscious. The major chromatic scale emphasizes pure, positive spectrum color and confrontations of discrete color-shapes.

1953 was an extraordinarily productive year during which the artist experimented in a variety of manners and moods without committing himself to any single plastic solution. The fiery, brilliant *R*, and the related small gouache, *Number 1*, summon up the animistic forms and the chromatic magnificence of the 1952 triptych, but with more painterly



Number 12—1950/51. Oil on paper. 17 x 14.

Collection of the artist.

fullness. *J*, and two other similar works, were painted over crayon strokes and rubbings, which showed through with an effect of veiled, blanched elegance. *K* recovered the dry tactility and concreteness of his paintings of 1949 on an unsized duck, in thinned paint applications of rust, black and white. The deliberate, slow tempos and ponderous black shapes in this starkly beautiful painting indicated that Brooks could achieve poetic transformation as effectively by deceleration and minimal color as he could through dazzling speed of execution and rich color orchestration.

In *K*, and in many paintings that followed, Brooks often used mixtures of commercial enamels and extended, or diluted, plastic paint, along with oils from the tube, in order to produce a non-reflective surface and to limit the viscosity of his pigment. Even though he thinned and dried his medium, he still managed to create over-lapping effects of subtle, shining transparency, the sense of the painting as a multi-layered experience in deep space; this device at the same time emphasized the concrete, physical facts of the painted surface by revealing its backing of duck or linen. The interplay of bare and voluptuous surface, spatial illusion and flat physical support was matched by the coordinated ambiguities of execution and color shape construction. As a release from eccentric individual touch and handling, Brooks scraped, dragged, and, with a square of cardboard, squeegeed his paint onto the surface, thereby taking advantage of mechanical and regularized edges. With equal alertness, he developed an unmatched talent for hitting upon the lucky find in his manipulation of the free brush. His virtuosity in medium has a long technical history dating back to his experience as a WPA muralist, but the sense of the painting surface both as wall, or environment, and as an intimate journal grew directly out of the example of abstract expressionism. Whatever his methods, the activities of paint-handling and image-making took place instantaneously, and were indivisible.

During the next five years Brooks moved with growing assurance towards an imposing massiveness of form and controlled baroque rhythms. Instead of animating his surfaces by whipped and dragged line, or by a system of energetically hatched brush strokes, he relied on interpenetrating color shapes, transparent and opaque, operating at variable speeds. His repertory of identifiable shapes included the curving black tongue at the center of *Qualm*, the broad crimson zig-zag, or W form, entering at a steep diagonal in *Gordion*, the reverse serpentine cascade of blues in *Acanda*, the bulbous spheres and knobbly X's of *Karrig*, the finger-like tributaries of *Perraloo*. Beginning in 1954, he formed his painting titles with their first letters in alphabetical sequence according to the order of

completion. The syllables he added to make a word were merely a memory device, but they also have a certain blunt, rude ring to them, like the anglo-saxon, that suits the weighted, elementary forms they describe.

Undramatic in themselves, these new forms surge with vivid life, and yet act to arrest, and hence articulate, the drama of spatial ebb and flow. They find a natural metaphor in the tide, with its ceaseless flux and reflux. Their power to endure and to implant themselves firmly in the imagination seems unaffected by the absence of an explicit representational imagery. Indeed, if their imagistic role were to be intensified, they would immediately lose their mercurial adaptability to the manifold, constantly shifting spatial structure they define. Yet, the artist has repeatedly said that formal structuring in itself is a sterile pursuit; his forms have their own revealed, distinct "psychology" and behavior patterns, a pulling and hauling familial existence, a now brawling, now gentle metamorphic life, a history, and a destiny that enlarge their meaning and relate them to human psychology in action.

Brooks' palette in these years alternated between muted earth tones and blacks used as positive color, and bursting complexes of spectrum color. In 1956 and 1957, in such paintings as *Karrig* and *Gordion*, his exquisite material sensibility sought expression through weighty clusters of red and black, possibly in response to the enriched physical surfaces and dramatic color key of Philip Guston during this period. In 1960, the rudimentary, uncouth shapes and wild, improvisatory energies of *Flintro* showed Guston's direct influence, and Brooks was to recognize the relationship of this painting to Guston's work, but only after it had been completed. One can surmise, too, on stylistic evidence, that in his own gradual change from a pictorial form based on a multitude of weighted brushstrokes to distinct shape definition—a shape palpable in its material density yet tremulous with the potential of movement—Guston in turn learned, whether consciously or not, from the example of Brooks. When the year-by-year history of the abstract expressionists is written, the dynamic interaction of the artists, the perpetual, daily excitement of shock and discovery, and the transmission and adaptation of new pictorial ideas among them will make a most instructive chapter. In this process of collective growth, Brooks has been both an influential force and an alert and responsive reactor, particularly to the art of Tomlin, Pollock, de Kooning, and, most recently, Guston. The hints he has taken from these artists have been assimilated and transposed into an utterly personal expressive language. One could justly characterize Brooks as Dryden did Ben Jonson for his dependence upon the classics: "He in-

Number 7—1960. Oil on paper,  $29\frac{1}{2} \times 22\frac{1}{4}$ .

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel M. Kootz.



vades authors like a monarch, and what would be theft in other poets is only victory in him."

1959 began a period of renewed experiment, self-study and difficult transition. For a time, he painted with stiffer, more constructed forms, apparent in the thickened, irregular lattice-work of line of *Rasalus* and *Haneve*, as if to curb the arabesques and curving serpentine movements that came so naturally to his hand. In an interview in *Scrap*, he spoke of his growing impatience with the complexity and intense activism of surface of his preceding work: "I want to present a more completed painting. I would like to absorb the accident. I would like a quieter painting, a painting that is dumber, less articulate, that has fewer interesting parts and less fascination in the working of the parts. I want more meaning for the whole."\*

The following year, with *Iago* and *Jondol*, Brooks resorted once again to unhasting curves and less obviously aggressive forms. His rough, shaggy shapes were registered with a new quality of indifference to their constituent elements and niceties of formal adjustment, set down almost absently, it seemed, with a loose, unemphatic brush. The artist had turned his attention away from crisp, individual detail or accent to a more generalized expression. In so doing, he achieved a new unity of impulse and image, and a brooding poetry, too, flooding his canvases with blues and blacks in whose dim and misty depths thin, translucent washes of bright pigment shone fitfully with a sombre glamour. His blurred, aberrant shapes, run together and muddled in vague tonal diffusions, and a deliberate relaxation of directional brushwork seemed at first glance to nullify the vivacity and intricate working of form that had been the distinctive features of his past art. In actuality, a series of paintings of striking originality and power emerged from this change, drawing on unsuspected sources of vitality within an unfamiliar and challenging pictorial environment.

The life-giving capacity for change in Brooks' art is supported and fed by a creative rhythm of self-elimination and self-recovery. He is constantly enlarging his expressive language and testing new pictorial ideas, even when they seem to violate the skilled manipulation of color-shape and tonal nuance for which he is best known. A proven master of delicate color modulation and sensitive handling, Brooks has recently given weighty plastic and emotional implications to their opposite qualities: dead, drizzling zones of unmodulated color, and a clumsiness, apparently un-

\* *Scrap*, ed. Sidney Geist, "a looming mystery," an interview, January 20, 1961, New York, p. 3.

Number 1—1960. Oil on paper. 20 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 11.

Collection of the artist.



focused manipulation of shape and edge. But these new and unsettling procedures reveal a firm purpose and sensuous beauty when we overcome our first shock of surprise. As he once found in speed of execution and automatism a release from self-conscious control, so now he relies on a device of inattention and the frustration, or interruption, of movement to free invention.

On one level, the introduction of an increased degree of permissiveness is a way of eliminating repetitive mannerism and flourish, and affords a negative safeguard against facility. On another level, it makes even more poignant and expressive the autographic touch and identifiable writing or shaping activity of the artist's hand in the work, his human agency, for he has forced himself to accommodate a larger quantity of shapeless matter. In the work of recent years, Brooks' ego-identification with mark, touch and stroke is, paradoxically, both more subtly insinuating and transparently direct. He has charged with immediately vivid expressive life such unpromising procedures and means as the smudge, the muddied wipe of a liquid brush, wavering scratch lines, islands of exposed canvas alternating with thin washes of film-like tone, and unlovely, viscid shapes whose paint surface has been partially lifted in irregular patches with newspaper. The painting *Octon* dramatically demonstrates how such apparently infelicitous means may be charged with new beauty. The play of variable texture also continually emphasizes the dual role of paint as recessive illusion and flat surface, spatial cover and mysterious vista.

Since 1960, Brooks has continued to reappraise his art, again and again recasting his own established methods of execution and image-making. The "looming mystery" he sought in *Jondol* acquires fresh meaning in the dark, closely-keyed colors and slowly descending forms of *Burwak*. This painting and *Sull* attain a stern, sullen grandeur. Their major shapes are large—nearly too large for the canvas rectangle—and have an unwieldy and untidy quality. Yet, their muted, somber harmonies of tone communicate a memorable sensuous beauty, too. Under pressure from such imposing presences, one rejoices in a few bright scraps of color, and the fragile, small-scale aberrations of edge and shape conformation. These paintings are "oceanic" in their impact, with strangely disturbing powers of ego-reduction. One is reminded of Pierre Reverdy's statement that the modern poet "no longer seeks to stir the reader by a more or less eloquent exposition of an event, but to move him as broadly, as *purely* as he would be by a sky all crackling with stars, by a calm, grandiose, tragic sea or a great, silent drama played by clouds under the sun."



Number 6—1960. Oil on paper. 14 3/4 x 20 3/4.

Collection of the artist.

In a more intimate, alternate manner, Brooks has worked over the past two years on paintings of smaller or intermediate size, such as *Pask*, *Nado* and *Lurry*, with a renewed emphasis on graphic elements and strident color opposition. Line acts here not so much as limiting contour or edge, but as an explosive interjection redirecting and offsetting the rhythmic course and movement of color shape. His thin, rioting, bright colors rivet the attention and the eye as cruelly as the gaudiest American artifact, or comic strip. These violent assertions, so contemporary in their vitality and at odds with the dark and graded tonal depths, and sober reticences of his other recent work, bring Brooks' painting full circle. He seems to be alluding again to the astringent color combinations of his earliest realistic paintings, and to the intermittent appearance of a deliberately artificial palette of chemical brilliance in his first abstractions. What Brooks has described as the 'funny paper color' of his current paintings recalls the period shortly after the war when he drew shaded, abstract shapes over newspaper cartoons and illustrations combining a mass-produced, visual vernacular and the mandarin style of cubism, and gaining vitality from their juxtaposition. Similarly, the use of line to correct, continue or offset a color shape, a line either incised or built up in assertive relief, and sometimes suspended in ambiguous spatial depth like a hair on a lense, has its origin in the early phases of his abstract art.

Throughout his career, Brooks' painting has shown a wide range of expressive content and an enviable capacity for change, within a remarkably consistent evolution. His ability continually to redefine and enlarge his expressive language is as striking as the high levels of performance and the evenness of quality he sustained. Whenever his predilections of the moment, and his repertory of shape, stroke and hue seemed about to settle into formula or mannerism, he has not hesitated to gamble on elements of disruptive change, a strategy that has been notably successful in reviving his sources of creativity and strength. His art is eminently level-headed and reasonable, at one level showing a classical regard for the typical and representative. But he also constantly wanders outside his own established norms and tests himself ruthlessly against new experience without fear or prejudice. He moves from strength to strength, valuing his own esthetic composure only by the amounts of fresh experience and adventurous impulse it is able to contain, subdue and bring to new points of refinement.

The dynamic of James Brooks' artistic development is based on the free play of antagonistic qualities of expression and temperament: explicit line and indefinite color zone, insinuating poetry and blatant,



Number 8—1961. Ink.  $27\frac{1}{2}$  x 40.  
Collection of the artist.

direct statement, the love of the transient and the need for the tangible, intellectual control and romantic spontaneity. Such apparent contradictions, in fact, need and support each other, within individual paintings and in his work as a whole. Behind them is a view of the world that has replaced the traditional, sterile dualism of subjectivity and objectivity with a new sense of reality as the direct issue of our own actions and modes of perception. Brooks has frequently referred to contemporary painting in such philosophical terms, and identified his own art's precarious, living balance of clear sense and blind urge, objective image and intuition as its inner core of meaning. His words perhaps best sum up the tension of belief and the resolute wholeness of vision which are at once the basis and object of his painting: "The conflict between spontaneous and deliberate behaviour, a great dualism of modern times, is felt keenly by the artist. It is also resolved more successfully by him because he deals with the actual form of the process of development, in which the static concepts of subject and object, spirit and matter, freedom and necessity, the immediate and tradition, have become harmless paradox."<sup>\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup> *American Painting Today*, ed. Nathaniel Pousette-Dart, New York, 1956, p. 114.



## Plates



Tondo—1951. Oil. 81 diameter.

Collection of The Rockefeller Institute.



Number 18—1947. Oil.  $35\frac{1}{2}$  diameter.

Collection of the artist.

Dialogue, 1947. Oil. 36 x 48.

Collection of the artist.





Number 5—1948 (front and back). Oil, 48 x 36.

Collection of the artist.



Maine. 1948. Oil. 32 x 36.

Collection of the artist.



Number 3—1949. Oil. 38 x 36.

Collection of the artist.



Number 41—1949. Oil. 37 x 96.

Collection of the artist.



Number 27—1950. Oil. 37 x 46.

Whitney Museum of American Art,  
gift of Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger.

Number 42--1950. Oil. 82 x 105 1/2.

Collection of the artist.



Untitled. 1951. Gouache. 28 x 20 1/4.

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. James M. Perkins.



J—1952. Oil. 84 x 44.

Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Bernard Brodsky.



Triptych—1952. Oil. 89 x 120.

Collection of the artist.





Number 4—1952. Tempera. 28 1/4 x 22.  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger.



Number 3—1952. Gouache. 22 x 29.  
Collection of the artist.



K—1953. Oil, 40 x 88.

Collection of the artist.

J—1953. Oil, 27 x 31.

Collection of the artist.



R—1953. Oil. 82 x 88.

Collection of The Chase Manhattan Bank.





Qualm, 1954. Oil, 61 x 57  $\frac{1}{8}$ .

The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Mrs. Bliss Parkinson.



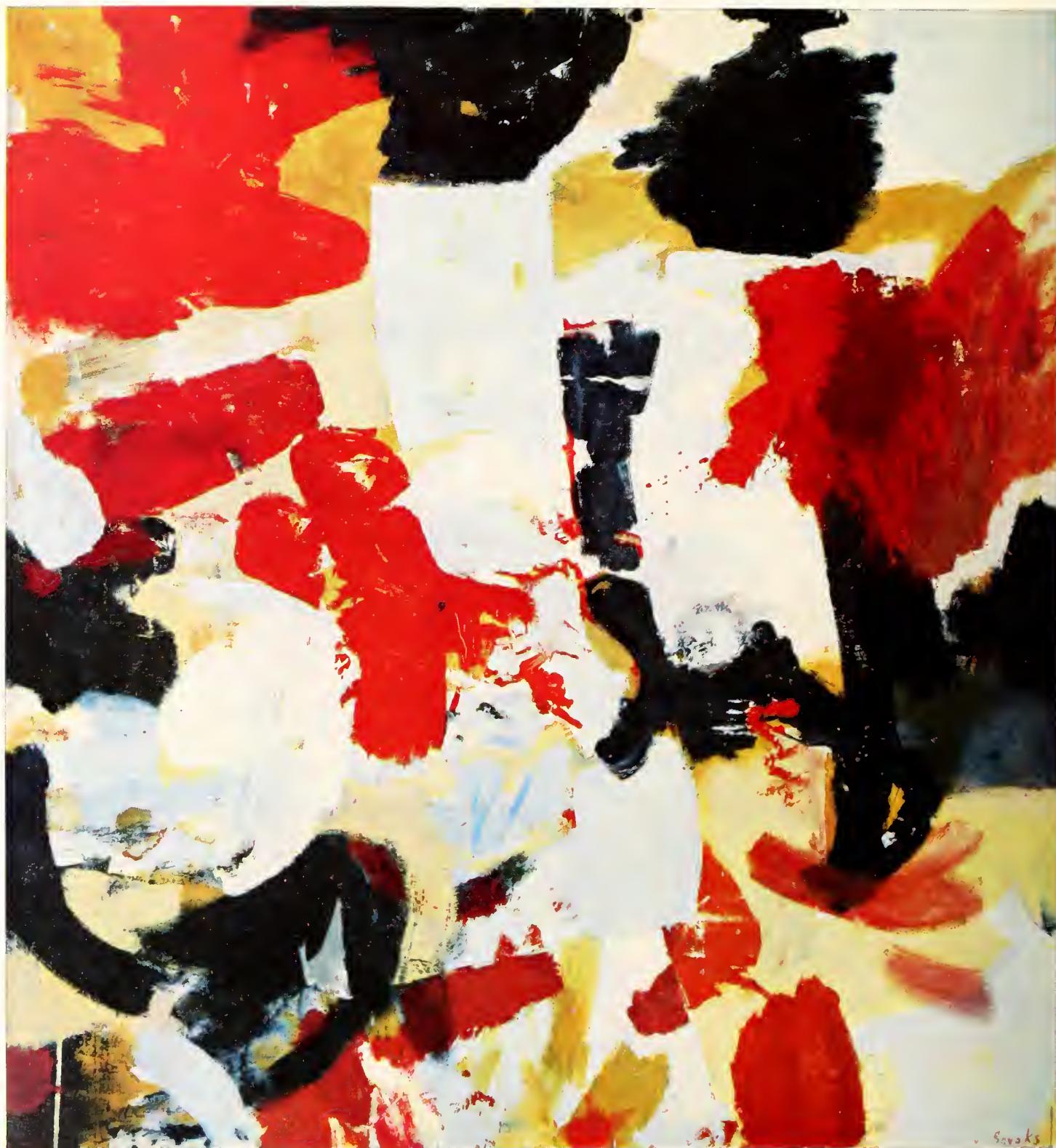
Holdan, 1955. Oil, 85 x 40.

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Patrick B. McGinnis.

Floxurn. 1955. Oil. 64 x 59.

Samuel M. Kootz Gallery.





Karrig. 1956. Oil. 79 x 73½.

Collection of the Walker Art Center.



Gordion. 1957. Oil. 41½ x 89½.

Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Bernard Brodsky.



Acanda, 1958, Oil, 81 x 66.

Samuel M. Kootz Gallery.

Flintro. 1960. Oil. 66 x 84.

Collection of Gardner Cowles.



Rasalus, 1959. Oil, 66 x 79 3/4.

Whitney Museum of American Art, gift of the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art.





Iago. 1960. Oil. 67 x 72.

Samuel M. Kootz Gallery.



Pask, 1961, Oil, 46 x 67.

Collection of Mrs. Frederick W. Hilles.

Rodado, 1961. Oil. 57 x 78.

The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, the Gevirtz Purchase Fund.



Sull. 1961. Oil. 78 x 92.

Samuel M. Kootz Gallery.





Octon, 1961, Oil, 84 x 66.

Michener Foundation, Allentown Art Museum.

Burwak, 1962. Oil. 72 x 72.

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward J. Mathews.

Garn, 1962. Oil. 34 x 36.

Collection of Mrs. Harry Elliot Doniger.





Cudny, 1962. Acrylic emulsion and oil, 72 x 72.

Samuel M. Kootz Gallery.





Lurry. 1962. Oil. 48 x 42.

Collection of Mrs. Maurice L. Stone.

Kass. 1962. Acrylic emulsion and oil. 48 x 54.

Samuel M. Kootz Gallery.



# Chronology

1906. Born October 18, St. Louis, Missouri, the son of William Rodolphus and Abigail F. (Williamson) Brooks. One brother, two sisters. Father a traveling salesman and family moved about a great deal.

1911-14. Lived in Oklahoma City, and Shawnee, Oklahoma.

1914-16. Lived in Denver, Colorado.

1916-26. Lived in Dallas, Texas.

1922. Graduated from Oak Cliff High School, Dallas.

1923-25. Attended Southern Methodist University, Dallas, majoring in art.

1925-26. Studied at Dallas Art Institute, and with Martha Simkins, a former William Merritt Chase student.

1926. Moved to New York City.

1927-30. Attended night classes at Art Students League with Kimon Nicolaides and Boardman Robinson. Worked as a commercial letterer to support art studies, doing pen lettering for advertising and display purposes.

1931. Summer: shared a converted barn studio with Bradley Walker Tomlin in Woodstock, New York.

1931-34. Travelled in the West and Southwest on sketching trips. Began to exhibit prints and paintings in the social-realist genre in group shows at the Midtown Galleries, Whitney Museum of American Art, and elsewhere in New York.

1934. Lithograph, *Early Morning*, bought for New York City Public Schools from the First Municipal Art Exhibition, Rockefeller Center Forum, New York. *Early Morning* shown in Whitney Museum of American Art, first biennial.

1935. Awarded First Prize for prints, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts. Won national competition, section of fine arts, Washington, D.C., for mural project for Hempstead, Long Island, post office; not executed.

1936. First museum purchase: lithograph, *Copper Mine, Butte*, by Whitney Museum of American Art from Second Biennial of Contemporary American Sculpture, Drawings, and Prints. Through WPA Federal Art Project met painters Jackson Pollock and Philip Guston.

1936-12. Worked on WPA Federal Art Project, New York, executing murals.

1938. Completed mural, *The Acquisition of Long Island*, Queensborough Public Library, Woodside Branch.

1940. Completed mural *Labor and Leisure*, Little Falls, New Jersey, post office.

1942. Completed mural, *Flight*, Marine Terminal, La Guardia Airport, New York, after working on it two and one-half years.

1942-45. Served in U.S. Army, active on detached service with the historical section as a "combat artist" in Egypt and the Near East. Attained rank of technical sergeant.

1945. Assigned to presentation division of the O.S.S. in Washington, D.C.

1945. Resumed painting and turned to abstraction. Lived in New York.

1946. Exhibited at the Mortimer Levitt Gallery, New York.

1946-47. Studied with the painter, Wallace Harrison, in New York.

1946-48. Instructor of drawing at Columbia University, New York.

1947. December 22: married the painter, Charlotte Park.

1948-59. Instructor in lettering at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn.

1949. First one-man show at the Peridot Gallery, New York.  
Moved to Montauk, Long Island, for summers.

1950. One of a group of 18 advanced painters and 10 sculptors to sign an open letter to the President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art protesting the museum's policy and jury system in connection with its national exhibition of American art.

1952. Awarded Fifth Prize, Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, for painting, *M-1951*.

1955-60. Visiting critic of advanced painting, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

1957. Awarded First Painting Prize and Logan Medal, 62nd American Exhibition, Art Institute of Chicago, for painting, *R-1953*.

1961. Awarded Norman Wait Harris Silver Medal and Prize, 64th American Exhibition, Art Institute of Chicago, for painting, *Larpolo*.

1962. Appointed artist in residence at the American Academy in Rome, Spring, 1963.  
Lives in New York and Springs, Long Island.

#### ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS

1949, 1950, 1951, 1952: Peridot Gallery, New York. 1952: Miller-Pollard Gallery, Seattle. 1953: Peridot Gallery, New York; Area Arts Gallery, San Francisco. 1954: Grace Borgenicht Gallery, New York. 1956, 1957, 1959: Stable Gallery, New York. 1961, 1962: Kootz Gallery, New York.

#### MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo • Brooklyn Museum • Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh • Dallas Museum of Fine Arts • Detroit Institute of Arts • Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York • Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York • Museum of Modern Art, New York • Nebraska University Museum, Lincoln • Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia • Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts • Tate Gallery, London • Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford • Walker Art Center, Minneapolis • Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

#### CORPORATION COLLECTIONS

Chase Manhattan Bank, New York • Singer Manufacturing Company, New York • Union Carbide Corporation, New York.

# Catalogue of the Exhibition

*The arrangement is chronological.  
Measurements are in inches, height  
preceding width. Works marked with  
an asterisk are exhibited at the  
Whitney Museum only.*

*Numbers 20, 22 and 35 are exhibited at  
the Whitney Museum and at Brandeis  
University, number 19 at the above and  
the Baltimore Museum.*

## OILS

1. Dialogue. 1947. 36 x 48. Lent by the artist. II.
2. Green Bottle. 1947. 24 x 30. Lent by the artist.
3. Figure. 1948. 36 x 30. Lent by the artist.
4. Maine. 1948. 32 x 36. Lent by the artist. II.
5. Number 3—1949. 38 x 36. Lent by the artist. II.
6. Number 41—1949. 37 x 96. Lent by the artist. II.
7. Number 27—1950. 37 x 46. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger. II.
8. Number 36—1950. 41 x 45. Lent by the artist.
9. Number 42—1950. 82 x 105½. Lent by the artist. II.
10. J—1952. 84 x 44. Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Bernard Brodsky. II.
11. Triptych—1952. 89 x 120. Lent by the artist. II.
12. J—1953. 27 x 31. Lent by the artist. II.
13. K—1953. 40 x 88. Lent by the artist. II.
14. R—1953.\* 82 x 88. Lent by The Chase Manhattan Bank. II.
15. T—1953.\* 46 x 54. Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Joseph M. Kirmsley.
16. Abacus. 1954. Three panels 14 x 120 (over-all). Lent by the artist.
17. Qualm. 1954. 61 x 57½. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Mrs. Bliss Parkinson. II.
18. Floxurn. 1955. 64 x 59. Lent by the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery. II.
19. Gant. 1955. 53½ x 62½. Lent by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Gift of Seymour H. Knox.
20. Holdan. 1955. 85 x 40. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Patrick B. McGinnis. II.
- 21. Martoc.\* 1955. 68 x 50. Lent by The Lannan Foundation.
22. Perraloo. 1955. 48 x 67½. Lent by the Wadsworth Atheneum. Gift of Mrs. Frederick W. Hilles.
23. Jackson. 1956. 66¾ x 69¾. Lent by a private collection, New York.
24. Karrig. 1956. 79 x 73½. Lent by the Walker Art Center. II.
25. Ludlow.\* 1956. 52 x 48. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Joel M. Turner.
- 26. Gordion.\* 1957. 41½ x 89½. Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Bernard Brodsky. II.
27. Acanda. 1958. 84 x 66. Lent by the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery. II.
28. Rasalus. 1959. 66 x 79¾. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, gift of the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art. II.
- 29. Flintro.\* 1960. 66 x 84. Lent by Gardner Cowles. II.
30. Iago. 1960. 67 x 72. Lent by the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery. II.
31. Jondol. 1960. 72 x 72. Lent by The Carnegie Institute.
- 32. Khaeo.\* 1960. 78 x 92. Lent by the Nebraska Art Association.
33. Octon. 1961. 84 x 66. Lent by the Michener Foundation, Allentown Art Museum. II.
- 34. Pask.\* 1961. 46 x 67. Lent by Mrs. Frederick W. Hilles. II.

35. Rodado. 1961. 57 x 78. Lent by the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, the Gevirtz Purchase Fund. II.

36. Sull. 1961. 78 x 92. Lent by the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery. II.

— 37. Arnar.\* 1962. Acrylic emulsion and oil. 36 x 34. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Berton Roueché.

38. Burwak. 1962. 72 x 72. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Edward J. Mathews. II.

39. Cudny. 1962. Acrylic emulsion and oil. 72 x 72. Lent by the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery. II.

— 40. Garn.\* 1962. 34 x 36. Mrs. Harry Elliot Doniger. II.

41. Kass. 1962. Acrylic emulsion and oil. 48 x 54. Lent by the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery. II.

— 42. Lurry.\* 1962. 48 x 42. Lent by Mrs. Maurice L. Stone. II.

43. Maruga. 1962. Acrylic emulsion. 32 x 48. Lent by the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery.

44. Nado. 1962. 54 x 58. Lent by W. Hawkins Ferry.

#### GOUACHES

45. Dancers. 1947. 14 x 20. Lent by the artist.

— 46. Untitled.\* 1951. 28 x 20 $\frac{1}{4}$ . Lent by Mr. and Mrs. James M. Perkins. II.

47. Number 3—1952. 22 x 29. Lent by the artist. II.

48. Number 4—1952. Tempera. 28 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 22. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger. II.

49. Number 1—1953. 22 x 28. Lent by the artist.

50. Number 26—1953. 22 x 28. Lent by the artist.

51. Number 3—1956. 21 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 29 $\frac{1}{4}$ . Lent by the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery.

#### DRAWINGS

52. Drawing. 1947. Pencil.

— 53. Mr. Derby.\* 1947. Pencil over newspaper. 41 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 5 $\frac{1}{8}$ . Lent by the artist.

54. Oops. 1947. Pencil over newspaper. 12 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 5. Lent by the artist. II.

55. Whirling Hours.\* 1947. Pencil over newspaper. 4 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 5. Lent by the artist.

56. Number 12—1950/51. Oil on paper. 17 x 14. Lent by the artist. II.

57. Number 15—1951.\* Watercolor. 20 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 15. Lent by the artist.

58. Number 3—1952.\* Oil on paper. 22 x 28. Lent by the artist.

59. Number 15—1958.\* Ink. 12 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ . Lent by Jeffrey Potter.

60. Number 4—1960. Oil on paper. 20 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 14. Lent by the artist. II.

61. Number 6—1960. Oil on paper. 14 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ . Lent by the artist. II.

62. Number 7—1960. Oil on paper. 29 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ . Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Samuel M. Kootz. II.

63. Number 8—1960.\* Oil on paper. 29 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ . Lent by the artist.

64. Number 8—1961. Ink. 27 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 40. Lent by the artist. II.

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